

The IAMCR Political Economy Section: A Retrospective

Janet Wasko, *IAMCR President (and former section chair)*

The Political Economy Section of the International Association of Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) was officially created at the General Assembly meeting in Warsaw, Poland, in 1978. However, the seeds for the section's birth were actually planted at the 1976 IAMCR conference in Leicester, England, when a group of scholars met to discuss “materialist approaches” to communication research. This “special interest” group (see Hamelink & Nordenstreng, 2007) also met in Paris in March 1977, where a proposal to create an IAMCR section was discussed, with Graham Murdock (University of Leicester, UK) proposed to chair the section.¹ Another meeting was held in Czechoslovakia in May 1978 in preparation for the presentation of this proposal in Warsaw.²

While there were many critical and Marxist scholars participating in the IAMCR at this time,³ it might be surprising to more recent members that the section was not automatically accepted by some members of the association. Despite the reputation of the IAMCR as a critically oriented organization,⁴ a more careful look at the organization's history complicates this claim, and may explain why there was some resistance to the formation of a Political Economy section.

The IAMCR was officially formed in 1957, although the idea was discussed as early as 1946 by UNESCO. For several years, it represented a small association of mostly European male researchers, who met to discuss developments in the growing field of mass media. The organization grew with the expansion of the media itself, as well as the development of mass communication research and media education (especially journalism education). During these early years, researchers who participated represented a range of theoretical and methodological perspectives, incorporating mainstream social science as well as critical theory and Marxism. For instance, active members at this time included Wilbur Schramm (heading a section on Psychological and Sociological Research), Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann, George Gerbner, Dallas Smythe and Herb Schiller. As the organization expanded internationally, it also attracted active participation from Eastern European and Soviet media scholars. As Cees Hamelink and Kaarle Nordenstreng observe in the document, *IAMCR in Retrospect: 1957–2007*: “...IAMCR was not a Cold War project. On the contrary, it was founded on ecumenical soil crossing the East–West as well as the North–South divides”.

However, it might be argued that around the time that the Political Economy section was formed in 1978, the association was a deliberately balanced “cold war” organization, which carefully planned its biannual meetings to rotate between West, East, and South (or first, second, and third world) locations, with leadership positions appointed accordingly. So, in light of this history, perhaps it is not surprising then that the proposal for a Political Economy section in 1978 was accompanied by “heated debate” (as Hamelink and Nordenstreng observe in their IAMCR history cited above).

Early participants in the group—Robin Cheesman and Roque Faraone recall: “...our ‘enemies’ were really not only the conservative western establishment... but also the conservative ‘state representatives’ from eastern Europe who did not want western leftists to challenge their monopoly”. In other words, while there may have been some personal motivations, the hesitancy by some members to accept the section can be seen as ideological.

But the section was eventually approved with Robin Cheesman (Roskilde University, Denmark) as the first section head.⁵ The group organized many memorable and impressive conference programs (including an historical meeting in the Ministry of Culture in Prague, Czechoslovakia, in 1984) and introduced the innovative idea of distributing papers before conferences. Other activities included a number of regional meetings, some held in conjunction with the newly formed Union for Democratic Communications (UDC) in North America.

There were a few years when the section’s survival was in doubt, not only because of organizational difficulties, but (again) ideological reasons. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, some IAMCR members even argued that the study of political economy itself was no longer needed. After the concerted efforts of some section members, as well as the growing recognition of political economy as a vital approach to understanding media, the section rebuilt. It has continued to grow, becoming one of the largest and most active sections in the organization. Of course, the organization as a whole has grown, but it is significant that the Political Economy section has become a strong and visible component of the overall association.

The section’s program at the IAMCR’s biannual, and then annual conferences, has brought together a wide range of scholars from all over the world, as well as young scholars. Joint sessions have been planned regularly with other sections, including Gender and Communication, Participatory Communication, and Communication Policy and Technology. In addition to conference activities (including a social event at most of the annual conferences), important publications have emerged. Two volumes in the IAMCR series with Hampton Press involved the Political Economy section. *Consuming audiences? Production and reception in media research* (edited by Wasko & Hagen, 2000) grew out of a panel in Seoul, Korea, in 1994. And, at least some of the work included in the Hampton series, *Political economy, communication and knowledge: A Latin American perspective* (edited by Bolaño, Mastrini, & Sierra, 2012) was section-based. Meanwhile, *Media in the age of marketization* (edited by Murdock & Wasko, 2011) was drawn from papers presented at the 2000 IAMCR conference in Singapore. Finally, *The Handbook of the Political Economy of Communications* (edited by Wasko, Murdock, & Sousa, 2012) was one of the first volumes in the IAMCR/Blackwell series titled, *Global Handbooks in Media and Communication Research*. It includes chapters by long-term contributors to the section.

The focus of the Political Economy section has developed over the years consistent with the evolution of a political economic approach to studying media and culture. Although additional themes and debates have emerged, the statement written by Vincent Mosco in 1998 still seems an appropriate description of the Political Economy section’s mandate:

The Political Economy Section examines the role of power in the production, distribution and exchange of mediated communication. Drawing from the rich history of political economic theory, section members study social relations in their totality, consider how they have developed historically, evaluate them according to standards of social justice, and intervene to bring about a more just and democratic world.

The research interests of section members include the development of a richer theoretical foundation in communication research by incorporating an understanding of how structures of power operate,

particularly in the process of transforming messages into commodities. Specifically, this entails examination of on the global political economy, which is centrally dependent on communication for its growth and on transnational media companies, which are increasingly in control of communication systems. This section also advances research on how this global political economy is constituted out of various national corporate and government institutions alongside class formations that mediate global and local power.

Other research interests involve the battles for control over communication resources. This research documents the interventions of workers, amidst an increasingly sophisticated international division of communication labour. Also important are the positionings of women and racial minorities who seek to redress fundamental imbalances in global communication and power. Recently, this research has expanded to address social movements in the communication arena, the state of the public sphere in an increasingly privatized audio-visual space, and the status of citizenship in a world that addresses people primarily as consumers.

Political economy has an historic commitment to praxis or the unity of research and social intervention. As a result, it has attracted members with a wide range of commitments to social change. Over the years this has included involvement in the movements to bring about a New World Information and Communication Order, now focused on the McBride Roundtable process. In addition, the section has attracted members with commitments to the rights of workers in the communication industries and to the rights of citizens to access the means of communication.

In recent years the section has advanced its commitment to multidisciplinary research by organizing joint sessions with other IAMCR sections on the topics of gender, race, ethnicity, and cultural studies. The section recognizes the need to consider social class, historically, a central coordinate on the map of political economy, along with gender, race, and nationality. It is also committed to examining how political economy, with its particular understanding of power as embedded in markets and institutions, relates to the field of cultural studies. Such scholars examine the social construction of meaning in texts and in the micro relations of power in social life.

The section recognizes the need to take up these new challenges while maintaining its historic mission of research and social intervention within a global political economy increasingly shaped by the power of transnational communication and information companies.

Of course, new challenges have emerged with the political and economic developments associated with digital and social media. Researchers affiliated with the section are addressing these developments, in the context of long-standing political economy issues.

The Political Economy section now celebrates this inaugural issue of an online journal that will make the work of section members even more accessible. We hope that this effort will provide another outlet to share our work, and contribute to the challenge of changing the world.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Robin Cheesman, Roque Faraone, and Vinnie Mosco for their collegial advice and institutional memory.

Endnotes

1. Participants included Armand Mattelart, Seth Siegelaub, Robin Cheesman, Fernando Perrone, Roque Faraone, François-Xavier Hutin, Giuseppe Richeri, Graham Murdock, Nicholas Garnham, and Janet Wasko.
2. One of the reasons for this meeting was that eastern Europeans could not travel freely, e.g., to Paris. The gathering included Kaarle Nordenstreng, Yassen Zassoursky, Roque Faraone, Robin Cheesman, Giuseppe Richeri, Giovanni Cesareo, as well as representatives from Poland, The German Democratic Republic, Hungary, and Yugoslavia.
3. Listing “critical” scholars is always a tricky affair, but individuals who were active in the IAMCR or at least attended conferences at this time and represented a critical or Marxist position, would surely include Dallas Smythe, Herbert Schiller, Graham Murdock, Peter Golding, Jan Ekecrantz, Robin Cheesman, Slavko Splichal, Miroљjub Radojkovic, and Tamás Szecskő.
4. It might be argued that the current IAMCR does not represent an organization of purely critical scholars, as some may assume. The IAMCR is definitely the most internationally representative organization of media scholars, as well as representing a diverse range of theoretical and methodological approaches. It is certainly possible to argue that more critically oriented research is presented at IAMCR conferences than at other gatherings of communications and media research organizations. And, IAMCR is definitely the only international organization that includes a section or division dedicated to political economy.
5. Section heads who followed Robin Cheesman included Zoltán Jakab (Hungary), Manjunath Pendakur (Canada/US), Vincent Mosco (Canada/US), Graham Murdock (UK), Janet Wasko (US), and Helena Sousa (Portugal). Others have served as Vice Heads, including John Sinclair (Australia), Andrew Calabrese (US), Nikhil Sinha (US/India), and Rodrigo Gómez García (Mexico).

Author Bio

Janet Wasko is the Knight Chair for Communication Research at University of Oregon in Eugene, Oregon, USA. She is the author, co-author, or editor of 19 books, including *Understanding Disney: The manufacture of fantasy and how Hollywood works*. Her research and teaching focuses on the political economy of media, especially the political economy of film, as well as issues relating to democracy and media. She currently serves as the President of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR).

References

- Bolaño, C., Mastrini, G., & Sierra, F. (2012). *Political economy, communication and knowledge: A Latin American perspective*. New York, NY: Hampton Press.
- Hagen, I., & Wasko, J. (Eds.). (2000). *Consuming audiences? Production and reception in media research*. New York, NY: Hampton Press.
- Hamelink, C., & Nordenstreng, K. (2007). *IAMCR in retrospect: 1957–2007*. Retrieved from <https://iamcr.org/about-iamcr/history/305-iamcr-in-retrospect>
- Mosco, V. (1998). *Political economy section – Section history*. Retrieved from <https://iamcr.org/-section-history-secpolecon-357>
- Murdock, G., & Wasko, J. (Eds.). (2011). *Media in the age of marketization*. New York, NY: Hampton Press.
- Wasko, J., Murdock, G., & Sousa, H. (Eds.). (2012). *The handbook of political economy of communications*. Malden, MA: Wiley/Blackwell.
-